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Lost & Found: A Personal Take On Chris Barber's Historic Recordings

by Bob Margolin

"I got the worst reviews of my life!" Muddy Waters told me, recalling his first tour of England in 1958. Muddy, on electric guitar, and piano player Otis Spann apparently had played too loudly or too aggressively for the conservative British press. Muddy said he guessed they were expecting a quieter acoustic artist, like Big Bill Broonzy.

Trying to accommodate, Muddy brought an acoustic guitar for his next trip. But by then, just a few years later, the young musicians who had been captivated by Muddy's first tour were clamoring for his bold electric blues. Muddy was amused by the irony of the press panning that had accompanied his worship by the musicians of the nascent British blues scene.

I always wondered what Muddy and Spann sounded like when they inspired some members of their first live British audience to block their ears and others to find the focus of their lives. In the 1970s, Muddy introduced me to his friend Chris Barber, who, as the man who had first brought Muddy to England, was responsible for this historic pollination. I was impressed immediately by Chris' warmth and enthusiasm for music. Now, 30 years later, I'm excited that Chris has found and released three CDs worth of recordings from tours he arranged not only for Muddy and Spann, but for a stellar array of American performers including Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Brownie McGhee & Sonny Terry, Champion Jack Dupree, Louis Jordan, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Jimmy Witherspoon, and Howlin' Wolf with Hubert Sumlin.

Except for Hubert, all those performers are gone, but Barber's The Blues Legacy: Lost & Found CD series is extending their recorded legacies. Most of the tracks date from the late Fifties and early Sixties. Chris relates the performers' histories and lovingly shares tour stories in modern interview segments, and his liner notes introduce each CD with a fan's joyful enthusiasm rather than a dry history lesson.

As I listen to the CDs, I'm impressed by Chris' expressive trombone playing, and I presume he led his band to back his guests so responsively. Crucial to the success of the music is drummer Graham Burbidge, who wasn't afraid to slam a driving backbeat and kept everyone

swinging loosely rather than plodding. As a bandleader, I know what it's like to carry a rhythm-challenged drummer on my back, and it sounds as ugly as that visual image. Chris' band's vocalist, Otilie Patterson, is a wonderful singer, both on her featured songs and on duets with Sister Rosetta, Louis Jordan, Jimmy Witherspoon, Sonny & Brownie, and Muddy. She has tone, chops, and taste.

Of course, this isn't an album review. I'm just pulling your ear toward newly available CDs that mean a lot to me historically and musically. But before I continue to relate the side trip of my own experience with them, I must urge your consideration: The guest artists here are world-class musicians. Those who sometimes performed without a band are presented that way on a few songs. You hear them about half a century ago, when they were middle-aged and at the peak of their powers, young enough to perform at their best but old enough to have fully developed their talents. This is blues spiced with jazz and gospel music, delivered live and lively. And it's top-shelf music, from Sister Rosetta's spiritual exuberance to Spann's virtuosity, from Hubert's playful creativity to Brownie & Sonny's honest country blues, from Jordan's commanding musicianship and Witherspoon's moving vocals to Champion Jack's humor.

My own relationship to Muddy's performance on *Lost & Found* has unfolded over time. I was only 9 when this recording was made, but 15 years later I was in Muddy's band. I came to know the man and his music over the next seven years. Since then, I've often had the same experience Muddy had when this music was recorded: flying overseas to play my best with an unfamiliar band. I've done this with fine bands in Germany, Finland, Chile, Spain, and Italy. As Barber did for Muddy and Spann, these younger musicians took care of the booking, logistics, and business in their respective countries, became my friends, and, most important, were musically prepared to work with me. Everybody wins, and it's another example of how blues brings people together. That's a foreign policy we all can endorse.

When Muddy traveled, he preferred to have at least one musician from his own band with him, and that must be why he brought Spann in 1958. In 1976, he brought Pinetop Perkins and me to play with The Band at *The Last Waltz* for the same reason. When I got my hands on this recording, I was curious to hear how Muddy handled his "first time," before I knew him. Frankly, he started a bit tentatively on "Hoochie Coochie Man," one of his signature songs that should be sung aggressively. Spann filled in strongly on piano behind him. Then Muddy introduced his next song, sounding formal and stiffly aware that he was in England, not Chicago. He rarely spoke to audiences this much, often preferring to say, simply, "Thank you!" and start his next song. Then, as later, Muddy would start a song with his voice or guitar and the band would fall in to complete the introduction.

Muddy soon loosened up and sang the rest of the show with much more spirit. He supported himself on guitar more than would have been necessary had there been other guitar players; besides himself, he usually carried two in his band. Muddy is known more as a blues icon than as a guitar player, but here his playing was supremely rhythmic, inventive, and toneful, and his wild slide solos can't be beat.

He sang Leroy Carr's "Blues Before Sunrise," announcing that his friend Carr had recently passed. In my experience, Muddy sang this song for himself when he personally was feeling the blues. Verse by verse, he would rebuild his strength and find redemption. Perhaps he was doing so here. He played his early hit "Rolling Stone" solo, soulfully, and assertively.

Muddy joked with the audience and tuned his guitar accurately (by ear) to open G for "Can't Be Satisfied," the song he later said "put him on the road." The original was recorded in 1948 with just Muddy on electric slide plus upright bass. This version featured Spann's expert support as well as Burbidge's truly great drumming. By the time Muddy performed the flip side of that record, "Feel Like Goin' Home," he was singing at his very best. Listen to this song and you'll have no doubt that Muddy's stature was earned. He played "Walkin' Through the Park" with Chris'

full band — interestingly, as a jump blues rather than the shuffle beat or mambo intro and outro plus shuffle that Muddy used with his own band. Muddy jumped time and came in a few beats early for the last verse, but the band easily followed him. That's spontaneous live performance by experienced musicians. For a reprise, Muddy traded verses with Otilie Patterson, who kept up with him in both sound and spirit.

I'm grateful to Muddy for his live and recorded lessons on leading a band, and to Chris for his lessons on backing legends and producing great historical recordings. I'm re-inspired to help present musicians at their best and to make our collaborations special for the players, the audiences, and those who might hear our live recordings 50 years from now.

Last year, I co-produced a CD of live performances by Muddy, James Cotton, and Johnny Winter from 1977. I'd played guitar at the original concerts, and I wrote liner notes for the new CD. The original tapes of those sessions also had been "lost and found." This year, that project, titled *Breakin' It Up, Breakin' It Down*, won a Blues Music Award for Best Historical Recording.

I predict that Chris Barber will be accepting awards for *Lost & Found* in 2009. I deeply appreciate his gifts.